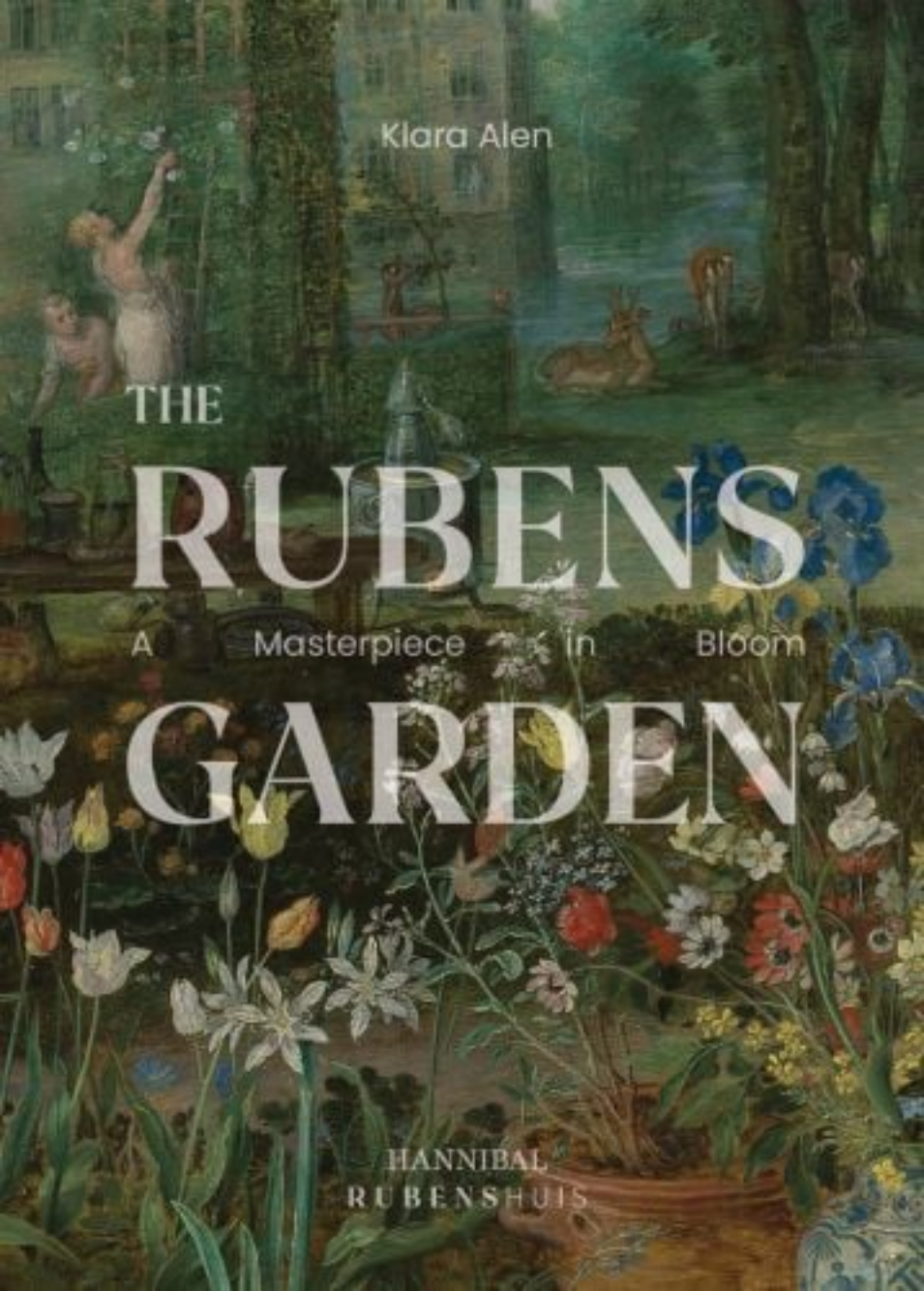
Klara Alen
THE
RUBENS
A Masterpiece In Bloom
GARDEN
HANNIBAL
RUBENSHUIS

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Willem and Jaspar, Rubens's gardeners

Digging, sowing, growing, planting, fertilising, sweeping, raking, hoeing, weeding, grafting, propagating, sanding and painting trellises and gates, showing guests around the garden, harvesting. These are just a few of the many tasks listed in 17th-century garden maintenance contracts in the Low Countries. We do not know whether Rubens also concluded such a comprehensive contract with his gardeners. Around 1640 – the year of his death – the family employed three women and five men. Coachman Jan used the stables in the garden. Willemyne the scullery maid knew best what to pick each season in Rubens's garden. But Jan Drion (the manservant, who also laid out the table), Franchoys (who ground the master's pigments) and Anneken and Adriaenken (the maids) also knew their way around the garden. Gardeners Willem Donckers and Jaspar Verbrugghen tended to the garden.

Willem took care of the general upkeep of Rubens's garden and – along with Jan Drion – was the highest-paid employee. His annual salary was 72 guilders, a high sum that can be explained by the relationship of trust between Willem and Rubens. In August 1638, Willem had access to the garden while Rubens and his family stayed at their country house *Het Steen* in Elewijt near

David Teniers II, *Spring*, c. 1644, The National Gallery, London

The pavilion: the eye-catcher

Looking from the portico towards the garden, all eyes are on the eye-catcher of the garden pavilion: the Roman demigod Hercules, a symbol of triumphant virtue and a familiar sight in Italian Renaissance gardens. He holds the apples he got from the garden of the Hesperides, the eleventh of his Twelve Works. In the garden, Hercules can unwind. He leans on a real wooden club.

A marble table dating from Rubens's time stands in front of Hercules. Originally, Hercules was flanked by Bacchus and Ceres, the god and goddess of wine and fertility, respectively. The three statues turned this place into an environment where virtue and lust went hand in hand. In the 20th century, Ceres was replaced by Venus, the goddess of love and fertility, for reasons yet unknown. The statue of Venus was created by Antwerp sculptor Willy Kreitz (1903–1982). Honos (Honour) is perched at the top of the niche in the pavilion, enthroned on a cornucopia, a horn of plenty. He personifies the spirit of the place (the *genius loci*) and watches over the happiness of the home and garden.

In his garden design, Rubens envisioned a spectacular view of the garden through the central arch of the portico. The façade of the Italianate garden pavilion, in the form of a *serliana* (an arch flanked by two lower rectangular openings) with *oculi* (round

Hercules in the pavilion of the Rubens Garden

1661

Jan Brueghel I and Peter Paul Rubens, *Allegory of Smell*, c. 1617,
Museo nacional del Prado, Madrid

Aquilegia vulgaris

Columbine

The graceful *Aquilegia vulgaris* or common columbine flowered in Rubens's garden in early summer. In *Den kleynen herbarius ofte kruydt boecxken* (Antwerp, 1640), columbines are described as 'very pretty flowers'. These elegant perennials were therefore often included in 17th-century flower still lifes. The seed of aquilegia was used as a cooking ingredient and against certain ailments. Aquilegia were praised for the diversity of their colour and form in the botanical works and gardening manuals of that period. 'For one can think of almost no colour that this flower does not come in, except perhaps yellow', according to Rembert Dodoens in his *Cruydt-boeck* of 1644.

Aquilegia vulgaris in the *Florilegium* by Emanuel Sweerts, 1614,
Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library, Antwerp

According to Lobelius, this plant thrived in cool southern climes and regions. In France and England, they were found in meadows, 'but the flowers are neither as beautiful nor as bright as those that grow in gardens: for they have two, three or four doubled flowers and thicker and brighter stems, with flowers in many colours, or each flower in one colour, or all three colours in one flower: namely white, purple and blue'. According to Lobelius, the flower was also perfect for flower posies 'for its flowers are a very nice purplish-blue, made of hollow spurs, with a shape that is very similar to the neck and beak of a dove, which is why it is also called columbine in English'. *Den verstandighen hovenier over de twaelf maenden van 't jaer* – the Flemish version of the gardeners' handbook that was published in Amsterdam in 1669 and was printed in 1672 by Reynier Sleghers on Kammenstraat in Antwerp – describes some of the differences in these bell-shaped flowers: 'they can have single or double flowers, red and white, blue and speckled, like hanging bells, for your pleasure in the garden'. A motley collection of aquilegia is depicted in Besler's *Hortus Eystettensis* of 1613, of which Rubens owned a copy, but also in other (trade) catalogues, including Emanuel Sweerts's *Florilegium* of 1614.

Den kleynen herbarius of 1640 describes how 'when these flowers have faded, they produce black seeds in elongated seed pods'. Columbine seed was sometimes added to sugar or candied for use as confectionery sugar in those days. Lobelius described how the seed was widely used 'to get rid of spots and freckles in one's face'. According to Dodoens, columbine seeds could help against congested gallbladder and liver and also remediate dizziness and fainting.

Pieter Holsteyn II, *Citrus medica* in *Flores a Petro Holstein ad vivum depicti*, 1640s, RHS Lindley Collections, London

Citrus

Many citrus plants such as lime, lemon, and orange look resplendent in the large oak tubs and colourfully glazed flower pots of the Rubens Garden. Thanks to a painting and archival documents, we know that Rubens owned an extensive collection of citrus plants and that he hired a cooper to make tubs in which the plants were placed. The same has been done in the 'new' garden. The current tubs are a superb example of the exceptional craftsmanship of Marleen Bonami, the only artisanal cooper in Belgium. The prickly ***Poncirus trifoliata*** (trifoliate orange) is the only citrus plant to survive winters in our climate, which is why it has been given a place in the parterres. Owning citrus plants was not uncommon or exceptional in Rubens's day, even in Antwerp. Citrus fruit was used for cooking and had various medicinal uses, including against the gout that Rubens suffered from. These are all the species you can find in tubs and pots in the garden from May until November: ***Citrus aurantifolia*** (lime), ***Citrus aurantium 'Salicifolia'*** (bitter orange), ***Citrus aurantium 'Striata'*** (a lemon and sour orange hybrid), ***Citrus japonica*** (kumquat), ***Citrus latifolia*** (Persian lime), ***Citrus limon*** (lemon) and ***Citrus limonia Osbeck*** (blood lemon), ***Citrus mitis*** (calamondin orange tree), ***Citrus paradisi*** (grapefruit), ***Citrus sinensis*** (sweet orange tree) and ***Citrus volkmeriana*** (red lemon).

Franciscus de Geest, *Fritillaria imperialis* in the *Hortus Amoenissimus*, 1668, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Rome

Fritillaria imperialis
Crown imperial

In early spring, the *Fritillaria imperialis* or crown imperial towers above all other bulbous plants, scattered throughout the eight large beds of the Rubens Garden. Striking orange bell-shaped flowers are suspended symmetrically and in a perfect circle – like stars around the stem. Contemporary sources do not mention the flower's musky 'fox smell', which is caused by sulphurous terpene. It deters moles, field mice, and voles.

Fritillaria meleagris

Snake's head fritillary

In early spring, nearly six hundred purple and white snake's head fritillaries adorn the parterres of the Rubens garden. This elegant stinzen plant is a beautiful native species that can compete with tender tulips, but whose flowers curve downwards, unlike tulips. Snake's head fritillaries combine beauty with humility. They were a popular species in 17th-century gardens and are often depicted in flower still lifes.

In Lobelius's book of herbs, *Fritillaria meleagris* is meticulously described: 'A thin stem, measuring 30 to 45 cm emerges from the centre of a tiny white bulb, smaller than a daffodil bulb, as if it had already been split into two'. Elongated narrow leaves grown on one, two or occasionally three, pretty flowers curved and arching downwards that are similar to the tulip but smaller, with seven pale yellow stamens, of which the petals are speckled with brown and pale purple spots and stripes. Dodoens recounts how this flower found its way from France to the Netherlands, thriving particularly well there, sometimes with as many as two flowers per stalk. In the garden of a Brussels painter, the rare yellow variety bloomed alongside the purple and white snake's head fritillary in 1609. Franciscus van Sterbeeck described this humble species as *'Kivits-Eyren die uyt ronde bollekens voort-spruyten, de bladen lanck en in den top schoone ghesprenckelde en ghestippelde bloemen dragen tot cieraet van den Hof'* (the eggs of lapwing that spring forth from round spheres, with long leaves and pretty speckled and spotted flowers at the top, embellishing the garden). Pieter Holsteyn II drew a beautiful snake's head fritillary in the 1640s in the flower album *Flores a Petro Holstein ad vivum depicti*, on which the dotted pattern is clearly visible.

Pieter Holsteyn II, *Fritillaria meleagris* in *Flores a Petro Holstein ad vivum depicti*, 1640s, RHS Lindley Collections, London

Baltasar van der Ast, *Viceroy Merveilleuse*, 1632–1657, Fondation Custodia – Collection Frits Lugt, Paris

Tulipa

Tulip

In spring, just under a thousand tulips, in all shades of yellow, red, and purple, bring colour to the parterres of the new museum garden. A total of 22 varieties were planted, divided by colour in different 'tulip pockets': *Absalon, Acuminata, Alba Regalis, Bacchus, Batalinii 'Bronze Charm', 'Black and White', Clusiana, Clusiana 'peppermintstick', Duc van tol Red and Yellow, Duc van tol Violet, Eichleri, Insulinde, Julia Farnese, Lac van Rijn, Little Princes, Maryland, Rubens, Sprengeri, Sylvestris, The Lizard, Turkestanica*, and *Whittallii*. Tulips are by far the most frequently mentioned flower in archival sources about Antwerp city gardens in Rubens's time. New archival research for the Rubens Garden also revealed a novel fact, namely that there also was an Antwerp tulip mania. Rubens maintained contacts with some tulip speculators. In 1637, the tulip bubble burst, wreaking financial havoc.

This book was published on the occasion of the redevelopment of the garden of the Rubenshuis in 2024, designed by Ars Horti.

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Cover
Jan Brueghel I and Peter Paul Rubens, *Allegory of Smell* (detail), c. 1617, Museo nacional del Prado, Madrid

The American Women's Club of Antwerp is a social, cultural and philanthropic club of international English-speaking women from all over the world. The club celebrated its 95th anniversary in 2024, a rich history of bringing English speaking women in the Antwerp area a place and purpose in a country that, for many, is not their own.

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